The World Before 1492

CHAPTER OBJECTIVE
Demonstrate an understanding of the life and culture among the first North Americans and, later, the independent development of cultures among Native Americans, Europeans, and Africans before the encounters of 1492.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

THE PEOPLING OF NORTH AMERICA

1.1 Describe what the archaeological record tells about the arrival, development, and cultures of the first peoples of North America.

THE DIVERSE COMMUNITIES OF THE AMERICAS IN THE 1400s

1.2 Describe the diversity of American Indian cultures in the United States on the eve of their encounter with Europeans.

A CHANGING EUROPE IN THE 1400s

1.3 Describe the changes in Europe that led to Columbus's voyages and that shaped European attitudes when encountering the peoples of the Americas.

AFRICA IN THE 1400s

1.4 Describe the political, cultural, and religious developments in Africa that would shape contact between Europeans and Africans in the Americas.

ASIA IN THE 1400s

1.5 Contrast developments in Asia with those in Europe at the time when Europeans first reached the Americas.

2 Part I Contact and Exploration, 1491–1607

Jacques Le Moyne, an early French explorer, recorded Native American women cultivating crops. Within the cultures of most North American tribes, women were, indeed, the prime cultivators of crops, while men hunted.

The Navajo people, or Dine as they prefer to be called, tell a story of their coming into this world. The story begins in a world of darkness (Nihodihil):

Because of the strife in the First World, First Man (Atse Hastin), First Woman (Atse Essan), and the Coyote called First Angry, followed by all the others, climbed up from the World of Darkness and Dampness to the Second or Blue World.

From this dark or black world the people emerged through the blue and yellow worlds before finally making their way to the bright white world where they live today:

The Locust was the first to reach the next world. He looked around, and saw that the world was covered with water that glittered and everything looked white. This is why they call it the Glittering World or White World (Nihalgai).

Soon, First Man and First Woman began to make things they way they were supposed to be. The Holy People helped them. Their first job was to rebuild the mountains.....Then, the people made a fire. To start it, they used flint....First Man and First Woman wanted a hogan....Talking God helped to build the first hogan....This was the place where the people lived and worked.

By now First Man and First Woman had become human. They were like us.
Navajo art regularly portrayed the many different gods that in Navajo tradition accompanied human beings in their emergence into the world. The Navajo believed that these gods could help, hinder, or occasionally play tricks on people in their daily lives.

After this, there were four seasons. In the spring, the plants came up from the ground. In the winter, the plants died and were hidden under the snow. Then in the spring they came up again. The plants grew into crops like corn, beans, and squash.

Source: There are many versions of the Navajo creation story. This account was provided by Harry Benally, a Navajo carver and silversmith from Sheep Springs, New Mexico, and Harold Carey, a Navajo historian from Malad City, Idaho. http://navajopeople.org/blog/navajo-creation-story-nihalgai-the-glittering-or-white-world/ downloaded February 14, 2013.

Other North American tribes had their own stories of how their people emerged onto the earth from a region below, or arrived through the water, or came down from the clouds. All believed that some ancient pilgrimage had brought them to the place where their tribe resided and would, with divine favor, reside forever.

Modern anthropologists tend to trace the path of early human immigration from Asia either on foot across what was sometimes dry land between what is now Russian Siberia and Alaska or by small boats that hugged the coast of the two continents beginning some 25,000 or even 35,000 years ago. Hunters from Siberia may have followed their animal prey across solid land and then fanned out across the Americas. Seafaring travelers might have followed the fish from Alaska down the coast of North and South America. Perhaps both forms of migration took place.

While the ancestors of modern American Indians were building their communities, establishing their culture, and engaging in extended trade with other Native Americans, other humans in other parts of the world were developing their own quite different cultures. Carvings found in southern France and North Africa date from the same period as the earliest settlements of the Americas. Although contact between the rest of the world and the Americas was at best minimal, the people who lived in Africa, Asia, and Europe maintained some level of contact with one another over thousands of years, even as they developed their own languages as well as agricultural and social systems. The arrival of Europeans in the Americas after 1492 led to dramatic transformations of the cultures of all of these places. Peoples who had developed very different cultural norms as well as different ways of viewing the world suddenly came into contact with each other. Understanding the independent development of people and cultures on both sides of the Atlantic is essential to understanding how contact between them would significantly change them all.

Significant Dates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approx. Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30,000 years ago</td>
<td>Earliest signs of settlement in Western Alaska and California; Stone Age carvings dating to this era found in France and North Africa</td>
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<tr>
<td>c. 750</td>
<td>Mound-building cultures expand in the Mississippi River Valley</td>
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<tr>
<td>850–1100s</td>
<td>Rise and decline of the Anasazi in Chaco Canyon; founding of Acoma Pueblo</td>
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<tr>
<td>950–1400</td>
<td>Rise and decline of Cahokia</td>
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<tr>
<td>1101</td>
<td>Norse colony of Vinland established in North America</td>
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<tr>
<td>1142</td>
<td>Possible date for the founding of the Iroquois Confederacy</td>
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<td>1324</td>
<td>Pilgrimage of Mansa Musa, Emperor of Mali, to Mecca</td>
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<tr>
<td>1325</td>
<td>Rise of Aztec Empire; founding of Tenochtitlan (Mexico City)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1348–1350s</td>
<td>Bubonic plague begins in Europe</td>
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<td>1415</td>
<td>Portuguese begin exploration of the Atlantic coast of Africa</td>
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<td>1421–1423</td>
<td>Chinese explore the Indian Ocean and East Africa</td>
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<td>1453</td>
<td>Ottoman Turks capture Constantinople</td>
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<td>1458</td>
<td>Songhay Empire captures Timbuktu</td>
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<td>1469</td>
<td>Marriage of Isabella of Castile and Ferdinand of Aragon</td>
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<td>1485</td>
<td>King Henry VII ends the War of the Roses, unified England</td>
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<td>1488</td>
<td>Bartolomeu Dias rounds Cape of Good Hope</td>
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<td>1492</td>
<td>Granada falls to Christians ending Islamic rule in Spain; Christopher Columbus sails from Spain to the Americas</td>
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<tr>
<td>1493–1528</td>
<td>Askia Muhammad rules Songhay Empire at its height</td>
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<tr>
<td>1498</td>
<td>Vasco da Gama reaches India from Portugal</td>
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THE PEOPLING OF NORTH AMERICA

1.1 Describe what the archeological record tells about the arrival, development, and cultures of the first peoples of North America.

While the Navajo told the stories of First Man and First Woman emerging after the long journey up through various worlds to find themselves in the place where the tribe lived, other Native Americans had their own creation stories. To the residents of the Jemez Pueblo in northern New Mexico, Fotease (chief of the War society) planned a journey to come to this world to test the people’s power, and when they arrived at the site of their pueblo they knew they had found the right place saying, “This will be the place for us forever; from here we are not going to move the pueblo to any other place.” For the Shasta of what is now the Northwest United States, their world began when Old Man Above bored a hole through the sky and came down to Earth to plant the first trees and to create birds and fish and all the animals, including the grizzly bear, and then continued to live in his tepee, Mount Shasta. In the Zuni story the sun was lonely, so he sent for the people who lived below the ground and invited them to come out and live in the sunlight and gave them corn.

While storytellers in every tribe keep these creation stories alive, modern anthropologists have a different explanation of the way the various tribes arrived in the places where they lived. During an ice age, more of the world’s water is stored in glaciers. As a result, the oceans are lower, sometimes much lower. Geological evidence indicates that between 36,000 and 32,000 years ago and again between 25,000 and 14,000 years ago, substantial dry land existed between the northern tip of Asia in Siberia and North America (see Map 1-1).
This land was wide enough for animals, including mammoths and the human hunters who followed them, to cross. But when the glaciers melted, oceans rose, and what anthropologists now refer to as the Bering Land Bridge disappeared under what is now the Bering Sea. Any further human migration had to be by boat, which would explain the rapid expansion of human communities from Alaska to the southern tip of South America.

The Land Bridge, Clovis Culture, and Recent Discoveries

Most anthropologists used to believe that the first immigrants to the Americas were the Clovis people who might have come to North America around 13,000 years ago. The Clovis people took their name from a site near what is now Clovis, New Mexico, where a trove of 13,000-year-old arrow and spear points was found in 1929. The points, which were fluted so they could be attached to spears, were obvious signs of human activity and were the oldest human artifacts found in the Americas up to that time.

Recent excavations in central Texas, however, found primitive spear tips that are at least 15,500 years old, much older and less sophisticated than those found at Clovis. Archaeologists have discovered similar evidence at many sites elsewhere in the Americas. Because no Clovis-like spear tips have ever been found in Siberia, most anthropologists now believe that the Clovis spear point was an invention that early Americans developed long after they had lost contact with Asia.

Newer anthropological evidence also suggests that not all of the first peoples of the Americas walked to get there. Other peoples may have crossed the oceans thousands of years before the first Europeans ever set foot in the Western Hemisphere. Whenever and however the first inhabitants of the Americas came, their descendants adapted to their new lands, spread out across the Americas, and created a wide range of languages and civilizations. By 14,000 years ago, various peoples were living in every part of North and South America.

**Spear points found near Clovis, New Mexico. The human workmanship on these points is obvious, and though earlier spear points have now been found these show the development of Native American hunting skill at an early time.**

**Bering Land Bridge**

The name given to the land that connected Alaska and Siberia thousands of years ago, which is now under the current Bering Sea.

**Clovis people**

The name of early residents of North America whose spear points were found near what is now Clovis, New Mexico, in 1929.
Many American Indian tribes moved often, seeking better hunting or farming or to escape more belligerent neighbors. The Natchez tribe of Louisiana is related linguistically and culturally to the pyramid builders of Mexico and Guatemala. They tell a story of their movement north to Louisiana that fits with the archeological evidence of such a movement around the year 800. A Keeper, or priest, of the Natchez told the following story to a Frenchman in Louisiana in the 1700s.

Before we came to this land we lived yonder under the sun [pointing with his finger nearly southwest, by which I understood that he meant Mexico]; we lived in a fine country where the earth is always pleasant; there our Suns [chiefs] had their abode, and our nation maintained itself for a long time against the ancients of the country, who conquered some of our villages in the plains but never could force us from the mountains. Our nation extended itself along the great water [the Gulf of Mexico] where this large river [the Mississippi] loses itself; but as our enemies were become very numerous, and very wicked, our Suns sent some of their subjects who lived near this river, to examine whether we could retire into the country through which it flowed. The country on the east side of the river being found extremely pleasant, the Great Sun, upon the return of those who had examined it, ordered all his subjects who lived in the plains, and who still defended themselves against the ancients of the country, to remove into this land, here to build a temple, and to preserve the eternal fire.


Thinking Critically

1. **Documentary Analysis**
   How does the story teller explain the migration patterns of his people?

2. **Historical Interpretation**
   What light does the story shed on relations between American Indian peoples before the arrival of Columbus in the Americas?

### Changing Climate and Cultures—Anasazi and Cahokia

Before the arrival of Columbus, the largest and most sophisticated civilizations in the Americas were found in Mexico and South America. Nevertheless, hundreds of years before Columbus crossed the ocean, complex communities could be found in the present-day United States—among the ancient residents of Chaco Canyon in New Mexico, known as the Anasazi, and among the Cahokia people of the Mississippi River Valley.

#### The Anasazi of the Southwest

The Anasazi, or “ancient ones,” began building communities in New Mexico and Arizona perhaps 700 years before the arrival of Columbus. They cultivated crops such as corn (or maize), beans, squash, and chilies that were needed to feed a settled, urbanized community. In time, the Anasazi began developing Chaco Canyon in northwest New Mexico as the hub of a widespread trade and ceremonial-religious network. Chaco Canyon was a large city built of logs and adobe (mud bricks) with buildings as high as five stories. It included more than a dozen pueblos (large buildings) in an area measuring 8 miles by 2 miles. Facing the main plaza, with its underground kivas where religious rites were conducted, Pueblo Bonito contained 800 rooms and may have housed 2,800 people. It was the largest “apartment” building in North America until the 1880s. Roads from Chaco Canyon allowed trade to develop in many directions. Turquoise and other valuable goods were traded, perhaps as far south as central Mexico.

After a prolonged drought in the early 1100s, the Anasazi abandoned Chaco Canyon. Their descendants created small farming communities across the Southwest. Some built the cliff dwellings that can still be seen at Mesa Verde in southwestern Colorado. While smaller than Chaco Canyon, Mesa Verde includes some 200 rooms. Built into the side of the canyon wall, the rooms offered protection...
The Anasazi built housing or palaces into the cliffs to provide protection from the weather and from other tribes who might try to attack.

from enemies, since they could be reached only by ladders. By 1360, the Anasazi, faced with another great drought, also abandoned Mesa Verde and seem to have disappeared from history, though the founders of Acoma Pueblo may have been Anasazi. Acoma, not far from Albuquerque, New Mexico, was established some time in the 1100s. Still functioning today, it may be the oldest continuously inhabited city in the current United States.

Other peoples, known as the Hohokam settled on lands further west near present-day Phoenix, Arizona. While the Hohokam communities existed for hundreds of years, the high point of their civilization is estimated to have been between 1150 and 1450. They developed an extensive agricultural system using canals to irrigate crops that included cotton, tobacco, corn, beans, and squash. But like the Anasazi, they slowly declined. Ruins of Hohokam communities may be seen in Casa Grande, Arizona. Slowly Hopi, Zuni, Pueblo, and Navajo peoples moved into the older Anasazi and Hohokam territory of New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, and Colorado and built the pueblos and villages that the first Spanish explorers encountered in the 1500s.

CAHOKIA AND THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER VALLEY The Cahokia people of the Mississippi Valley, also known as the Mound Builders, created a flourishing culture between 900 and 1350. If one could go back 1,000 years and visit Cahokia, the center of this culture, one would find a city surrounded by strong wooden walls with thatch-covered houses that were home to 20,000 to 40,000 people near what is now East St. Louis, Illinois. Cahokia was probably the largest settlement in what is now the United States, and 1,000 years ago, its "Mississippian culture" flourished throughout the Mississippi Valley and beyond. Archaeologists have found similar mound-building communities at Coosa and Etowah, Georgia; Moundville, Alabama; and Natchez, Mississippi.
Aztec artists created this drawing of the cultivation of corn before the arrival of the first Europeans.

At the center of Cahokia, a series of wide earth mounds up to 100 feet high led to the people being called the Mound Builders. These mounds were used to bury the most prominent leaders. Atop the central mound was a temple and a wide plaza used for ceremonies centered on the seasons and the sun. The plaza was located on a perfect north-south axis, and a massive circle of wooden posts functioned as a kind of observatory to trace the sun’s path.

Priests and chiefs at Cahokia tracked the sun, conducted rituals, and dispensed gifts that displayed their power, while nearby hamlets grew the food that fed the city’s inhabitants. Such large, settled communities were possible because agricultural practices had replaced the earlier hunting and gathering economy and made a differentiated society possible. By about 900, a warming trend in the earth’s climate had made new forms of agriculture possible. Instead of being limited to what they could find or hunt to eat, residents of Cahokia were thus able to begin farming. Like the Hohokam of the Southwest, they cultivated squash, corn, and beans, which they could grow on a seasonal basis, store as a surplus through the winter, and thereby support an urbanized culture. When eaten together, maize and beans form a complete protein, and as a result, the population could be well nourished.

In Cahokia, and in most settled Native American cultures, farming was women’s work. Men hunted to add animal protein and flavor to the diet. Together, they produced a rich supply of food, enough to sustain not only themselves but a much larger community that included many—priests, chiefs, and the workers who built the mounds—who neither farmed nor hunted.

Quick Review
Describe in what ways the Anasazi and Cahokia cultures changed over time. What unique features did each culture develop? What did they have in common?
THE DIVERSE COMMUNITIES OF THE AMERICAS IN THE 1400s

1.2 Describe the diversity of American Indian cultures in the United States on the eve of their encounter with Europeans.

The native peoples of North America were a remarkably diverse group. They spoke many different languages, some more different from each other than English is from Chinese. These languages were spread among 500 to 600 independent societies with different approaches to hunting and farming, different social structures, varying creation stories, and diverse understandings of the spiritual (see Map 1-2). Nevertheless, Native American tribes

MAP 1-2 North American Culture Areas, c. 1500. The lands that would become the United States include significantly different climate zones, and in the 1500s, when many Native American tribes had their first contact with Europeans, these different climates produced significantly different tribal cultures depending on where the people lived.

*There is considerable debate today about the terms American Indian and Native American. In fact, most of the descendants of the first peoples of North America prefer to be identified by their specific tribe—Navajo or Mohawk or Cherokee or whatever specific group—when possible. When speaking of larger groups of native peoples, some think that Native American is a more respectful term while many others prefer to be called American Indian or Indian. In Mexico most prefer “indigenous” while many Canadian tribes prefer “first nations.” In keeping with that diversity of preferences, this book uses tribal names when relevant and otherwise uses the terms American Indian or Indian and Native American interchangeably.
also tended to share some things in common. They tended to live comfortably with nature and in harmony with the sacred, which they found in every aspect of life. They saw time as circular—not a steady line from creation to the present and future, but a reoccurring series of events to be celebrated in rituals that involved the retelling of ancient stories linked to the annual growth of the crops and to animal life. They honored shamans and priests who were considered visionaries and who were expected to have contact with the supernatural and keep the stories alive. These shamans and priests had the special responsibility of helping restore harmony when it was disrupted by disease, war, or climactic changes that brought famine. Most native North Americans saw the community and not the individual as the focus of life and labor. Community members won fame and respect by what they gave away more than by what they kept for themselves. The accumulative spirit of autonomous Europeans, gaining ever more possessions—especially land and the status in European society that came from land ownership—made no sense to most American Indians.

Although precise measurement is impossible, scholars estimate that approximately 7 million Indians lived in what is now the United States and Canada with much larger numbers in Mexico and Central and South America. The total population for all of the Americas was probably 50 to 70 million, perhaps as high as 100 million, when the first Europeans arrived. Europe's population at the time was approximately 70 to 90 million, and Africa's population was 50 to 70 million. If these numbers are correct, then although North America was relatively sparsely populated, the Americas as a whole had as many or more people than either Europe or Africa in 1492. Asia, it is worth noting, had a far larger population, perhaps in the range of 200 to 300 million people.

North American Indians also lived in a land of extraordinary physical diversity, from the tundra of Alaska to the forests of New England, from the prairies and grasslands of the Midwest to the lush Pacific Coast and the dry Southwest. In these diverse environments, climatic changes led to seasons of plenty and seasons of famine. Different environments also led to radically different ways of life. While the settled farmers of Cahokia and their descendants in the southeast and the pueblo peoples of the southwest left the clearest records, many nomadic tribes roamed the heart of the continent and the Pacific coast, depending much more on their skills as hunters and their ability to gather abundant plant foods than on settled agriculture. Success and failure in war or the spread of disease caused American Indian populations to ebb and flow long before the first European encounters.

The Pueblo People of the Southwest

Some of the largest American Indian settlements in what is now the United States were in the Southwest. In place of the abandoned Anasazi centers, Pueblo and Hopi people created thriving settlements in New Mexico and Arizona. Taos Pueblo in northern New Mexico, with its multistoried buildings for many families, is still inhabited as are many other Pueblo and Hopi communities in the region.

In the Pueblo and Hopi Southwest, an intricate maze of canals, dams, and terracing allowed agriculture to flourish in a dry climate. Like the Anasazi, the Pueblo and Hopi diet relied on corn, brown beans, and various forms of squash. They had domesticated turkeys and used dogs to hunt, so wild game, in addition to turkey, added animal protein to their diet.

In both Hopi and Pueblo communities, members of special societies wore ritual masks called kachinas and danced in ceremonies designed to connect the community with its ancestors while seeking their presence and blessing on the crops. The Pueblo people eventually spread out over Arizona and New Mexico, speaking different languages yet connected to each other by trade and common religious practices.

The Tribes of the Mississippi Valley

In the mid-1300s, Cahokia and the mound-building culture began to disappear. No one knows all of the reasons for this decline, but climate almost certainly had a role...
in it. Around 1350, a relatively rapid colder climate shift known as the “Little Ice Age” began and lasted until 1800. As the climate got colder, agriculture suffered. Europeans abandoned their settlements in places like Greenland. If the power of its priests and kings in Cahokia depended on their seeming control of the sun and the seasons, the Little Ice Age sapped that power. The change in weather drastically reduced the supply of food from outlying hamlets on which their large cities depended. Whatever all the reasons, by 1400, Cahokia was abandoned.

With the decline of Cahokia and the mound-building culture, the population of the Mississippi Valley shrank. The most direct descendants of Cahokia, the people later known as the Creeks, Choctaws, and Chickasaws, settled on the eastern side of the Mississippi River and the southern Appalachian Mountains.

Other tribes dominated other parts of Cahokia’s former territory. The Cherokees and Tuscaroras settled in parts of Georgia, Tennessee, and North Carolina. They are connected linguistically with the Iroquois of the Great Lakes and New York more than with the Creeks and Choctaws. Yet other tribes dominated the Piedmont of what would be the Carolinas. Whatever their language or background, most of these tribes lived in small communities of 500 to 2,000 people. None lived in cities that were anything like Cahokia. Neighboring villages might exchange corn or meat. Longer-distance exchange—and there was considerable long-distance exchange—was generally limited to things that were rare and easy to carry: copper implements, beads and shells from the Atlantic Coast, or quartz from the Rocky Mountains. Artifacts uncovered in almost any native settlement in North America attest to the lively trade among all of the continent’s tribes.

Archeological evidence also suggests that as Cahokia declined, smaller chiefdoms developed and often fought with each other and with other tribes. These communities, sometimes only a few families, built places of refuge throughout the Mississippi Valley. Mississippian villages in the 1400s included a half dozen to several dozen houses with a central field for games or ceremonies, all surrounded by a wooden wall that, if not strong enough to keep out a determined enemy, at least assured against surprise attacks. Several families often shared a single structure. Structures that housed a chief’s family were somewhat larger but do not seem to have reflected a grander lifestyle. As weather and war made food scarcer—it was harder to cultivate crops and more dangerous to hunt game if human enemies were lurking nearby. The possibility of starvation increased. Still, the first European explorers who arrived in the 1540s reported finding large settlements in modern South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Tennessee with rich well-tended fields and well-designed houses and villages.

The Pacific Coast—From the Shasta to the California Indians

In the Pacific Northwest, the Shasta and other tribes lived in towns of several hundred people, constructing houses as long as 60 feet built of cedar and richly decorated with painting and sculpture. These Pacific Coast Indians lived primarily on the abundant salmon in their rivers, which could be smoked or dried for year-round consumption. As a result of plentiful food and good housing, these tribes developed a settled community life with their own art and culture.

Farther down the Pacific Coast in California, the Yokuts, Miwoks, Maidu, and Pomo represented one of the largest concentrations of American Indians north of Mexico, perhaps 700,000 or 10 percent of the Indians north of the Rio Grande. These Native Americans lived in clans of extended families rather than larger tribal units. Their economy was based on gathering wild plants and on fishing and hunting. They did not engage in settled agriculture probably because the wild foods in California were so abundant and settled agriculture offered little improvement in their diet or way of life.

The Iroquois Confederacy and the Tribes of the Atlantic Coast

In the Northeast, the original five nations of the Iroquois (or the Haudenosaunee as they call themselves)—the Mohawks, Oneidas, Onondagas, Cayugas, and Senecas—developed...
This drawing shows an Iroquois Onondaga village under an attack led by the French explorer Samuel de Champlain. It also shows the long houses that provided homes to several families, all surrounded by a stockade fence.

an alliance and a united front against other tribes, an approach that would also serve them well in their encounters with Europeans. The Iroquois Confederacy's central meeting place and council fire was near present-day Syracuse, New York. In Iroquois communities, several families would live in a single sturdy longhouse made of posts and poles covered with bark, but the house itself and the land around it belonged to the community. As many as 1,000 people lived in some Iroquois towns made up of many longhouses. Iroquois legends tell of a great peace-maker, Dekanawidah, who convinced the warring tribes to live together under the Great Law of Peace. An eclipse of the sun around the year 1142 supposedly strengthened his plea for unity. Clans led by women governed the five nations. The women leaders chose the sachems, male leaders who attended the council meetings and led in war but who were also accountable to the clans.

On the Atlantic Coast and the eastern slopes of the Appalachians were Algonquian-speaking tribes, the largest of which, the Powhatans, may have included 60,000 or more people. For these tribes—some of the first to encounter Europeans—hunting and fishing as well as farming corn, beans, and squash provided the major food sources. They lived in permanent towns and villages. Like other tribes, the Atlantic Coast Indians did not keep written records but even as late as the 1670s an English trader described an Indian town of many houses along crisscrossing streets, surrounded by a stockade 2-feet thick and 12-feet high. Social life centered in the ceremonies of the seasons that gave thanks for the gifts of food, especially the green corn dance held in late summer, which might attract several hundred Indians from surrounding villages, to give thanks for the harvest and to celebrate the start of a new year. Although the description came from the early 1600s, there is no reason to assume that Algonquian community life had changed much since the 1400s.

**The Aztec, Mayan, and Inca Empires**

Traveling south from the current United States in the mid-1400s, one came to the great Aztec city of Tenochtitlán. With a population of 200,000, it was as large as or larger than any contemporary city in Africa or Europe. The Aztecs founded Tenochtitlán...
In 1585, the English adventurer Sir Walter Raleigh founded the short-lived colony of Roanoke on the coast of what is now North Carolina. Richard Hakluyt—who never left England—used stories of Raleigh's experiences in North America to create a "true picture" of the American Indians. Since the Indians themselves did not keep such records, Hakluyt's account provides some of the best examples of what Native American life was like at the time of their first contacts with Europeans. Note: The Elizabethan English of the original is hard to follow. The text below has been rendered in contemporary English.

The Princes of Virginia...wear the hair of their heads long.... They wear a chain about their necks of pearls or beads of copper, which they much esteem, and they wear bracelets of the same material on their arms....They carry a quiver made of small rushes holding their bow ready bent in one hand, and an arrow in the other, ready to defend themselves. In this manner they go to war, or to their solemn feasts and banquets. They take much pleasure in hunting deer whereof there is great store in the country, for it is fruitful, pleasant, and full of good woods....

At a certain time of the year they make a great, and solemn feast whereunto their neighbors of the towns adjoining repair from all parts, every man attired in the most strange fashion....Then being set in order they dance, sing, and use the strangest gestures....All this is done after the sun is set for avoiding of the heat....

The towns of this country...are compassed about with poles stuck fast in the ground, but they are not very strong. The entrance is very narrow. There are but few houses therein, save those which belong to the king and his nobles.

This people therefore void of all covetousness live cheerfully and at their hearts ease. But they solemnize their feasts in the night, and therefore they keep very great fires to avoid darkness and to testify their joy.

Source: Copyright 2004 by the University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Thinking Critically

1. Documentary Analysis
Based on this document, what picture might an Elizabethan reader have formed about conditions in Virginia?

2. Crafting an Argument
In your opinion, how useful is this document as evidence of the true nature of American Indian societies in Virginia? What argument can you make to support your opinion?
on an island in the middle of Lake Texcoco in 1325, connected it to the mainland by three broad causeways, and supplied the city with fresh drinking water through a carefully designed aqueduct. When the Aztecs first arrived in central Mexico, the people who then ruled the region, known as the Toltecs, looked down on them as barbarians. That soon changed. The Aztecs conquered the Toltecs and destroyed their capital. The Aztec’s Tenochtitlan used Toltec designs, but was a new and grander capital. Led by their emperor, Aztec society was highly stratified; the emperor and priests at the top ruled a powerful empire with a population of 10 to 20 million that dominated subjugated tribes in surrounding areas.

The huge markets of Tenochtitlan in which 40,000 or 50,000 traders met to exchange gold and jewelry, pottery and baskets, meat, fish, fruit, and vegetables amazed the first Spaniards who described it as "thrice as large as the celebrated square in Salamanca [in Spain]." The Aztecs maintained an extensive trade network with other peoples but also made war on them to expand their empire and ensure a steady stream of prisoners for the human sacrifices they believed their gods demanded. While the Aztecs built their empire by making strategic alliances with other tribes, by the mid-1400s, they relied on their own large army and attacked former allies, creating enemies who would help the Spanish conquer the Aztecs in the early 1500s.

To the east and southeast of the Aztec Empire was the once great empire of the Maya. The Mayan Empire had been at its height long before the Aztecs emerged on the scene. Indeed, the Mayan culture had been developing for thousands of years when they first came into contact with Europeans. The high point of Mayan culture, known as the classical period, entered a period of decline hundreds of years before the rise of the Aztecs, probably due to an extended period of drought and overfarming of the land.

The Mayans dominated what is now the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico and much of modern Honduras, Belize, and Guatemala. The Mayans were the only American culture to develop a fully functional written language. They also developed sophisticated systems of mathematics and a calendar that projected time far into the future. Like the Aztecs, they practiced human sacrifice and subjugated other nearby tribes in pursuit of people and goods. They had an extensive agricultural system producing not only food but also cotton, which was a source of trade and wealth. While in decline, the Mayans, some 800,000 people divided into 16 to 18 independent kingdoms, were still a strong presence in western Mexico and Central America in the 1400s. The remains of their greatest architecture could be seen all around them. They still produced and traded cotton, and their trade routes connected them with the other empires of the Americas.

Further south, the Inca Empire was even larger than that of the Aztecs. It extended along the Pacific coast of South America from southern Colombia to northern Chile, and included almost all of what is today Peru, Ecuador, and Bolivia (see Map 1-3). The Incas ruled some 32 million people from their capital of Cuzco, another city of 200,000, in what is now Peru, and from the mountain fortress and religious center of Machu Picchu. The empire had a vast bureaucracy and army as well as 25,000 miles of roads and bridges rivaling those of ancient Rome, all supported by heavy taxes. Incan religion was centered on the sun and its seasons; human and animal sacrifice was common. The Inca emperor and his family were considered divine. Like the Aztecs, the Inca Empire was relatively new when Europeans encountered it in the early 1500s. The main Inca conquests had occurred only in the 1400s.
American Indian Cultures, Trade, and Initial Encounters with Europeans

While the peoples living in North and South America before 1492 were divided by significant language differences and great distances, they still knew quite a bit about each other and traded regularly with far distant communities. Trade networks stretched from the Aztec Empire across all parts of North America. The presence of sea shells in Native American communities a thousand miles from the ocean and copper implements hundreds of miles from the nearest copper mine attests to the trade in goods that was rich and varied by the 1400s (see Map 1-4).

Not all exchanges between tribes were friendly. There was certainly warfare also, sometimes to settle matters of honor and sometimes in the search for valuables. Hunting peoples seem to have raided farming communities, and farming communities fought with each other from time to time if one was thought to encroach on another’s land. Bows and arrows were deadly weapons, and scalping an enemy to gain a trophy, and perhaps a part of the enemy’s spirit, were well known before 1492.

Even though the native peoples of North and South America maintained their trade networks and fought with other tribes, each tribe saw itself as the center of its own world. Their different stories and cultures reflected that, although trade might be of value, trading partners were not seen as part of their community. To understand Indian responses to the arrival of the Europeans, it is essential first to understand that no Indians thought of themselves as being American Indians or Native Americans as opposed to white Europeans. Instead, they thought of themselves as Senecas or Creeks or Hopi or some other discrete population. This mindset prevented any unified resistance to the first European aggressions in the 1400s and, later, in the 1500s and even 1600s. If a particular tribe thought it made sense to ally with the Europeans against another tribe, or trade with the Europeans for new goods that would give them an advantage over another tribe, they saw no reason not to do so. If the Europeans could become part of well-established trade networks or allies in attacking long-standing enemies, so much the better. It took several hundred
years before most American Indians realized that the Europeans did not look on them as they looked on themselves and that any equality in trade or warfare was to be short lived. While different tribes were happy to make alliances with different groups of Europeans, Native American culture tended to understand warfare in ways radically different from most Europeans. War among tribes was usually a way to settle specific issues or achieve honor and, most of all, to restore the balance that was essential to Indian life. The European model of total conquest was a concept that would have been foreign to most American Indian cultures. In this way as in so many other ways, the Europeans who began arriving in the 1490s could not have been more different.

At the same time, and unknown to the people of the Americas, other peoples, living in Europe, Africa, and Asia were developing their own societies, creation stories, and world views. The world was never the same once representatives from these diverse peoples—Spanish explorers, slaves and free servants from West Africa, and those who followed them across the Atlantic—met and mingled with the native peoples of the Americas. But to understand the mingling, one must understand the development of separate cultures in other parts of the world.

Quick Review What are three unique cultural developments among specific American Indian tribes that were influenced by the geography or climate in which their tribe lived?

A CHANGING EUROPE IN THE 1400s

 Europeans had been sailing on the Atlantic long before Columbus was born. Norse sailors, commonly known as Vikings, came from modern-day Norway and Denmark and settled Iceland in the late 800s. In 980, they expanded their territory to Greenland where they interacted—not always peacefully—with the local Inuit people and exported lumber to Scandinavia while maintaining themselves with successful farms. In 1001, a Norse party led by Leif Erickson established a colony further west that they named Vineland. No one is sure where Vineland was, though tradition places it in North America. Modern excavations show the remains of a Norse colony in the modern Canadian province of Newfoundland. Some claim Norse settlements as far south as the modern state of Maine. But while Iceland maintained contact with Europe and the Greenland colony survived until the early 1400s when the same colder weather that undermined Cahokia also brought the Greenland colony to an end, Vineland was never permanent, and by the time Columbus was born, all earlier European contact with North America was long forgotten. In the hundred years before Columbus sailed across the Atlantic, Europe went through a series of extraordinary changes. Those changes not only set Columbus on his travels but shaped the beliefs and expectations with which the first Europeans arrived in the Americas.

If a time-traveler were to go back to the Europe of the 1400s—to London, England, or Seville, Spain, or Paris, France, or the rural countryside where most people lived—they would find a world that would seem strange and primitive. There were not a lot of people around. Europe was still recovering from the devastating Black Death, the bubonic plague that arrived in 1348 on rats carried by ships trading in the Black Sea. In a few years after it first arrived, the plague wiped out at least one-third, perhaps even one-half, of Europe’s population. About 70 million people lived in Europe in 1300. By the late 1350s, the plague had reduced the population to perhaps 45 million. Whole families and villages disappeared. Through the late 1300s, there were empty fields or forests where people had once lived or farmed. The loss of so many people traumatized the survivors who looked for someone to blame for the disaster. Jews, religious nonconformists, and foreigners made good scapegoats, and there were massive persecutions across Europe.
A unified Roman Catholic Christian Church dominated the religious life of Europe in the 1400s. The Protestant Reformation was still a century in the future. Distance between cities, the difficulty of travel, and political divisions resulted in a Catholic Church that was far less centralized than it is today. Nevertheless, the church, with its liturgy, creeds, and clergy—the pope, bishops, priests, monks, and nuns—was the strongest institution in Europe, unifying people who had different languages and leaders. Literacy, learning, and the preservation of culture rested mostly with the church. The church also provided what social services there were for the aged, sick, and poor. Jews lived in most parts of Europe, sometimes tolerated, sometimes savagely repressed, occasionally honored for their contributions to medicine, commerce, and scholarship, but they were a small minority. In the cities a great cathedral was the largest building, and everywhere church spires marked the center of both secular and religious life.

Life to modern eyes would seem primitive. Most people were dirty, poorly clothed, and illiterate. Life expectancy was in the 30s, especially because infant mortality and deaths from childbirth were high. Trade was limited because transporting most things was difficult and expensive. The church taught that seeking wealth, especially charging interest for loans, was sinful. People were encouraged to stay where they were—in the community and in social class where they were born, whether they were peasants or nobles.

The Ottoman Empire Changes Eastern Europe

In 1453, when Christopher Columbus was 2 years old, Muslim Ottoman Turks conquered the city of Constantinople, the most important city in Eastern Europe. From their new capital, renamed Istanbul, the Ottomans ruled an empire that stretched from Hungary to include the Balkans and most of the Middle East and North Africa. The Ottoman Empire controlled the eastern Mediterranean for the next 4 centuries.

The fall of Constantinople shocked Europe. Constantinople had been at the crossroads of the trade routes between Europe and Asia and was considered the equivalent of Rome as a religious and political center. The Ottomans encouraged trade within their empire, but restricted others from using the land and sea routes across the eastern Mediterranean. Suddenly Christian Europe was cut off from the lucrative land-based trade in spices and luxury goods with Asia that had existed since Italy's Marco Polo had traveled to China in the late 1200s. The Mediterranean, which had been the great unifying conduit of the Roman Empire, was now as divided as the lands surrounding it. The city states of Italy—Venice, Genoa, and Florence especially—which had dominated the Mediterranean and trade with Asia and grown wealthy from it, began a slow decline. Other Europeans on the Atlantic Coast, especially those in Portugal and Spain, began to seek new ways to reach Asia—without the need to deal with the Ottomans.

The Rise of Portuguese Exploration

The first and in many ways most adventurous European to seek a new way of connecting with Asia was Prince Henry of Portugal (1394–1460). Even before the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople, Henry, a younger son of the King of Portugal, decided that Portugal, with its strategic location on Europe's southern Atlantic Coast, should try to establish a new trade route to Asia by sailing around Africa.

Although he is known to history as "the Navigator," Henry's personal seagoing was modest. In 1415, he commanded a Portuguese fleet, but for the rest of his life, he stayed at his castle at Sagres on the Portuguese coast and commissioned others to make voyages and report back to him. These voyages generated not only geographical information about the African coast, but they also led to better navigational instruments and charts as well as better-designed ships that could travel greater distances in bad weather and good.

In 1424, Prince Henry organized a long series of expeditions—in which others did the actual travel—that sailed farther and farther south along the coast of Africa. Once they learned how to navigate the currents off the African coast, Portuguese explorers moved quickly. In 1444, Portuguese ships reached Senegal, long fabled as a source of
Prince Henry, a younger son of the king of Portugal, sponsored new developments in shipbuilding and navigation and ordered a series of voyages that allowed Portuguese sailors to explore the west coast of Africa and eventually, after Henry's death, to sail around the continent and on to India where they developed lucrative trade.

gold, and established a slave-trading company in Lagos. They reached Sierra Leone around 1466 as well as claimed and settled the previously uninhabited Cape Verde Islands. Finally, in 1488, Bartolomeu Dias rounded the Cape of Good Hope on the southern tip of Africa. A decade later, in 1498, Vasco da Gama followed Dias's route and reached India. These successful expeditions led to flourishing trade with Asia and Africa by the early 1500s. The Portuguese not only established a string of trading colonies in India, Indonesia, and China, they also developed a massive new African trade. Portuguese merchants virtually reinvented slavery in Western Europe, and Portugal became the first and most significant player in the African slave trade as well as in the spice trade with Asia. By 1504 at least one ship a month sailed from Lisbon to Asia, and the wealth from Asian spices and other luxury goods and from African gold and slaves was making Portugal the richest nation in Europe.

Historians have argued about Henry's, and by extension Portugal's, motives. Henry certainly wanted to find a route that would put Portugal at the center of the trade with Asia. Asian goods—porcelain, silk, spices—had long been popular and profitable luxury goods in Europe. The nation that could secure access to these goods after the Ottomans restricted the eastern Mediterranean routes would become rich. Old animosity between Christian Europe and the Muslim world fueled the quest to defy Ottoman trade obstacles. Legends of a Christian presence in the heart of Africa also motivated expanded contact with that continent. If the Christians of Europe could ally with Christians who might be in Africa, their armies would surround the Muslim world and weaken its power. Perhaps most important to Henry, however, was the wealth to be made in Africa itself. Portugal could obtain African gold and slaves from every voyage whether or not it made discoveries or alliances with far-off Christians.

Slavery was an ancient institution. It was sanctioned in the Bible and other ancient texts thousands of years before the days of Prince Henry. The Roman Empire had slaves, including some from Africa. But while slavery had died out in most of Europe during the Middle Ages—although serfs in Russia were only semi-free—it persisted in the Middle East and Africa. Arab traders brought African slaves across the Sahara to sell in markets in the Middle East. In fact, various African peoples routinely captured and enslaved their rivals. And Muslim conquerors and pirates enslaved captured European Christians. Europeans developed new forms of slavery along with the exploration of Africa. As early as 1336, King Alfonso IV of Portugal reported, and probably sponsored, slave raiding in the Canary Islands off the coast of West Africa. Indeed, the Canary Islands would be an important base for further exploration of Africa, one often contested between Portugal and Spain. After 1500, slavery would transform European commerce, most of all in the trade with European colonies in the Americas, while also transforming and weakening the economies of Africa, and—in particular—utterly changing the lives of millions of Africans.

England and France

While Portugal was establishing its ocean routes to Asia and growing fabulously wealthy in the process, most of the rest of Europe remained poor and distracted with more immediate worries. France and England fought the Hundred Years' War (1337–1453) with each other, depleting both nations' resources. When the war ended, France was divided by a bitter civil war until 1477 as the royal government sought to assert its control of the kingdom. England was also torn by a civil war, the War of the Roses, as the Lancaster and York branches of the royal family fought until Henry VII defeated Richard III of York in 1485. The destruction wrought by war and plague left little time, money, or energy for either France or England to engage in exploration.

Despite all their troubles, England and France were relatively unified kingdoms. In contrast, other areas of Europe were not united at all during this period and, in fact, would not be until the mid-1800s. For centuries before its unification, most of what
is now Germany was considered part of the Holy Roman Empire but the empire was actually a very loose confederation divided into a number of much smaller entities. No even nominally unified Italian state existed. Until the 1800s, what is now modern Italy was divided into many competing, independent free cities, principalities, and small kingdoms that spoke different and often mutually incomprehensible versions of Italian. These groups were also often at war with each other. As a result, these areas did not initiate much organized external exploration. Even though many sailors from what is now Italy were among the most important European explorers of the era, they worked for other governments.

The Unification and Rise of Spain

Unlike some other parts of Europe, Spain, however, achieved a dramatic new unity in the late 1400s, and this unified Spain would be a powerful force in the Americas. The political, cultural, and religious unification of Spain—known as the Reconquista, or “reconquest”—was an extraordinary development given the 7 centuries during which unity of any sort had seemed impossible. In 711, Muslim invaders from North Africa conquered most of the Iberian Peninsula (modern Spain and Portugal) and remained in control of parts of it for almost 800 years. While the rest of Europe remained Christian, much of Medieval Spain was in African Muslim (Moorish) hands.

Christian monarchs gradually reconquered Portugal and most of Spain from the Muslims, but the struggle took centuries. While some areas were ruled by Christians, many others remained Muslim. Yet the very divisions of Spain resulted in some of the richest cultural developments in Europe. While armies fought, people mingled, producing new ideas and some of the scientific developments that would later enrich all of Europe. It was through Spain that the culture of Islam came into Europe, including Arabic numerals, algebra, paper, cotton, rice, and sugar. It was in Muslim Córdoba that Greek philosophy, Roman law, and eastern art and architecture mixed. It was also in Spain, far more than elsewhere in Europe, that Jews were treated with respect, even honor, as “peoples of the book” who shared sacred scriptures with Christians and Muslims. It was also on the border lands between Christianity and Islam that some of the great medieval cities of Spain—León, Zamora, Burgos, and Ávila—emerged, creating an independent class of citizens who were neither nobles nor serfs but free women and men. As the medieval saying went, “the air of the city makes you free.”

Spain’s long-standing divisions ended in the late 1400s. By 1492, the Iberian Peninsula was divided into four Christian kingdoms—Castile, Aragon, Portugal, and Navarre—and one Muslim kingdom in the south—Granada. In 1469, Isabella of Castile married Ferdinand of Aragon. This marriage united the two most powerful Spanish thrones. The joint monarchs then began a long campaign to finish the reconquest of Spain. In January 1492, their armies defeated Muslim Granada, adding its territory to their kingdom and ending the 800-year long Islamic presence in Spain. That same year, in the name of religious uniformity, Ferdinand and Isabella expelled all Jews from Spain, a move that cost them some of their most innovative citizens. But Isabella and Ferdinand wanted their nation to be unified, and like most Europeans at the time, they saw religious uniformity as key to that goal. And in that same eventful year, Isabella commissioned an Italian sailor named Christopher Columbus to try to find a route to Asia that would be different from the African one Portugal was exploring.

Quick Review How did changes in Europe in the 1400s determine European states’ ability to launch expeditions of discovery in the Atlantic? How did the unification of Spain and the fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans affect this process?
AFRICA IN THE 1400s

Describe the political, cultural, and religious developments in Africa that would shape contact between Europeans and Africans in the Americas.

In the late 1400s, parts of Africa were also undergoing changes that would influence the cultural interactions that would take place in the "New World" in the 1500s. Just as in Europe and the Americas, none of the people in Africa knew that they were living on the edge of events that would turn their world upside down. Yet events were underway that would change the lives, economies, cultures, and worldviews of almost everyone.

Ancient Ties Between Africa and Europe

Contact between Africa and Europe did not begin with Prince Henry’s voyages. North Africa had been part of Mediterranean civilization for at least 3,000 years. What are today the nations of Egypt, Libya, Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia were some of the richest provinces of the Roman Empire. As Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire, some of the strongest Christian centers were in North Africa. One of the most influential of all early Christian thinkers was St. Augustine (354–430), born in what is now Algeria, who served as bishop of the Algerian city of Hippo. Farther south, Christianity took root quickly in Ethiopia, and that part of east Africa has remained predominantly Christian for 2,000 years. In addition, southern Europe and parts of Africa south of the Sahara Desert shared a long history of trade (see Map 1-5). This trade was never entirely interrupted, even when Arab armies conquered North Africa in the 600s and Islam replaced Christianity as the dominant religion there.

The Empires of Ghana, Mali, and Songhay

Coastal areas of Africa south of the Sahara that the Portuguese encountered in the mid-1400s differed in customs, ethnicity, and economic life from Muslim North Africa. As these coastal Africans met Portuguese traders, they quickly took an interest in particular European goods, including iron and cloth, acquiring them through exchanges of hides, copper, ivory, and slaves. Trade produced a greater variety of goods on both continents and, for the African elite, added the prestige of owning goods from far away. The Africa that first began major economic and cultural contact with Europe in those years was a continent that met its northern neighbor on terms of equality in military, cultural, and technological terms, its population not yet decimated by the massive trade in slaves that was to come or by attacks by industrialized European colonial forces.

Just south of the Sahara, the kingdom of Ghana governed much of West Africa for hundreds of years. Ghana’s power was based on trade and its mastery of metalworking to make weapons and tools. Ghana was at the northern end of African trade routes that brought gold, ivory, and slaves out of the African interior and at the southern end of the desert routes by which Muslim traders brought the slaves, gold, and ivory from south of the Sahara to North Africa, the Middle East, and Europe in exchange for salt, silk, and other goods. Control of that trade made Ghana rich. Royal and religious officials, soldiers, merchants, and iron workers dominated Ghana.

As early as 1050, King Barman dana of Mali began to extend his kingdom, and the empire of Mali slowly dominated and replaced Ghana as the leading power in the region. Barmandana converted to Islam and made a pilgrimage to Mecca, the Muslim holy city in Arabia. Some 200 years later, another Malian king, Sundiata, made Mali the master of West Africa. When one of Sundiata’s successors, Mansa Musa, made his pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324, his lavish caravan and generous gifts spread gold so freely that “the value of Cairo’s currency was depressed for many years.” Mansa Musa built new mosques and schools and established an Islamic university at Timbuktu that was respected throughout the Muslim world for its scholarship.
While Kongo kings were Catholic, most other Central Africans practiced traditional religions that included belief in a world after death, ancestor worship, and a central role for priests and other intermediaries between divine and human affairs. The Africans who were taken across the Atlantic to the Americas as slaves brought these religious and cultural traditions with them.

Kongo kings generally inherited the throne from their father or brother, but a group of nobles or electors could choose a different ruler. A similar system was found in much of Central Africa. In Ndongo, election ratified succession within a reigning family. In Biguba, in what is now Guinea-Bissau, the king was elected from among a group of elite families. In Sierra Leone, the ruler was elected, but once in office could dismiss the electors, and a similar system was followed in Benin. Europeans reported that, to maintain their own power, nobles sometimes deliberately selected weak monarchs. In 1601, one European wrote, "a village mayor in our country has more authority than such a king." In these West African kingdoms, a person or family could cultivate land secure in the knowledge that they would truly "own" the crops or goods produced on the land and could sell or trade them, but they could never sell the land itself. Indeed, if the family stopped working the land, any claim they might have to it disappeared.

Centralized government and the wealth generated by trade also led to military power that allowed West Africans to resist not only the first Portuguese attempts at conquest but also many subsequent ones. In 1446 when Portuguese explorers, seeking slaves and gold, reached the Senegal River (which is now the northern border of the country of Senegal), African canoes attacked their ship, and nearly all of the European raiders were killed. A year later the same thing happened to another crew near the island of Goree. Similar types of resistance would continue for the next 2 centuries.

African boats were small compared to European ships. They tended to be canoes dug out of a single log, but their small size gave them power. They could navigate shallow areas where the Europeans could not go and could move quickly between rivers, estuaries, and the ocean. These canoes carried as many as 50 to 100 fighters each. Facing such effective resistance at sea, before they ever landed on unknown shores or attempted to travel up uncharted and hostile rivers, the earliest Portuguese travelers quickly decided that it was better to seek peaceful trade agreements with African kings than to do battle. The result was that as early as 1456, Diogo Gomes represented the Portuguese crown in negotiating treaties of peace and commerce with African rulers of several states.

Slavery in Africa

Slavery was a significant part of the African economy in the 1400s. It was important in the empires of Mali and Songhay and in Kongo long before the Portuguese arrived. In an economic system where the community, not an individual, owned land in common, as it did in West Africa, owning people who could work the land was a way to accumulate wealth.

When the Portuguese began their African trade in the 1400s, African slaves had been brought across the Sahara to Europe and the Middle East for over 1,000 years. Benin City had seen slaves parade through for centuries. The Portuguese simply shifted part of this trade to Europeans on the coast and away from the Arab-dominated overland routes across the Sahara. Although the voracious demand for enslaved Africans in the Americas would disrupt the African economy in the 1600s and 1700s, that was a later story. When the Portuguese first became involved in the slave trade they merely built on existing trade and cultural traditions. Far fewer people were involved than would be the case in the future, but for those who were enslaved the new patterns created huge dislocations.

An African could be enslaved for many reasons—as punishment for crime or as payment for debt—but most slaves were captured in war from other communities. Those who sold them considered the slaves aliens, not people like themselves. Like the American Indians, Africans did not think of themselves as Africans but as members of a specific tribe—Ashanti, Yoruba, Kru—and enslaving members of another tribe did not distress them. The economic advantages of capturing slaves in war and then selling them also made war itself a profitable commercial venture and exacerbated other tensions.
Nevertheless, just because slavery and the slave trade were already part of the economic systems of West Africa when the Portuguese arrived in the mid-1400s does not change the horror of the institution. Being captured in war, losing one’s freedom, and then being sent away from home must always have been terrifying. It was even worse if one was forced to march across the terrible Sahara Desert or loaded onto a ship controlled by strange-looking people who spoke a totally different language and who considered slaves not merely aliens but subhuman. Although the earliest African and European slave traders did not recognize it—or probably care about it—a more terrible form of slavery was being born in the 1400s. For the first time, not only the slaves’ freedom but also their language, culture, and identity were being destroyed. The Africans unlucky enough to become American slaves already knew about slavery as an institution, but they had never encountered conditions in which they were stripped of everything familiar to them.

Africans, as slaves or as free people hired for the work, would accompany some of the earliest Portuguese, Spanish, and English explorers of North and South America in the 1500s, helping explore Florida, Virginia, Texas, and New Mexico. Descendants of Europeans and Africans have lived together with American Indians in the land that would be the United States for 500 years.

Quick Review

- How were empires like Mali and Songhay similar to or different from European kingdoms in the 1400s?
- How did the earliest European contact with Africa change, or not change, the nature of African slavery?

Asia in the 1400s

Contrast developments in Asia with those in Europe at the time when Europeans first reached the Americas.

While the Americas, Africa, and Europe were all divided into many small tribes, cities, and nation-states in the 1400s, China was united in a single empire and had been for more than 2,000 years. When Columbus sailed from Spain to the Americas in 1492, Europe had some 500 independent states. A single emperor governed perhaps 150 to 200 million people in China. Of course, China is not all of Asia. The Indian subcontinent included 75 to 150 million people living in many independent principalities. Korea and Japan were independent kingdoms, while Tibet and Vietnam struggled to maintain their independence from China. But Asia was much more unified than elsewhere, and most of the peoples of Asia were in contact with one another and enriched each one another’s cultures.

In 1421, the Chinese Emperor Zhu Di celebrated the completion of the Forbidden City, his new palace and temple complex in Beijing. Envoys from as far away as East Africa and Arabia were present. Twenty-six thousand guests feasted at a 10-course banquet. In the same month, England’s King Henry V celebrated his wedding to a French princess with 600 guests. Zhu Di’s army included 1 million soldiers armed with gunpowder while Henry had 5,000 soldiers armed with bows and arrows. But then, Zhu Di’s new capital of Beijing had a population that was 50 times larger than Henry’s London.

Zhu Di (r. 1402–1424) also commissioned Chinese fleets that sailed to South Asia, India, and East Africa. These treasure fleets mapped the Indian Ocean and brought back exotic animals, trade goods, and knowledge that made China a center of geographic studies in the early 1400s.

But Chinese oceanic exploration came at high cost. Huge forests in China and Vietnam were cleared to provide the teak to build the fleets’ ships. Thousands of artisans labored to build the ships, and many more left as sailors, most of whom never returned. The expensive ocean voyages also distracted China’s attention from its vulnerable land frontiers in the northwest. And the mandarins, China’s professional, highly educated bureaucrats, despised and resented the naval officers who were in charge of the fleets.
immediately.

For the next 200 years, China became increasingly isolated from the rest of the non-Asian world. As a result, China played no role in the initial creation of the new world that came into being as people of the Americas, Europe, and Africa interacted.

By the 1490s, China was prospering but quite inward looking. South Asia, especially India, was just beginning to be engaged in what would be a growing trade with Europe through the new trade routes that Portuguese explorers were establishing. Sub-Saharan Africa, dominated by the Songhay Empire and the kingdom of Kongo, was also trading with Europeans via a newly established Atlantic trade route dominated by the Portuguese, as well as their long-established trade routes across the Sahara that connected them with the Muslim world, increasingly dominated by the Ottoman Empire. American Indians had their own long-distance trade relationships that spanned thousands of miles, even though they never contemplated trade that might cross the oceans that bounded them. As all of this interaction was taking place, the newly united kingdom of Spain took the lead in seeking yet another way to expand trade in the world that they knew. At the beginning of the year 1492, no one living anywhere on the planet knew how eventful that effort to seek new pathways for trade would be.

Quick Review How did Asia differ from Europe? What effect did these differences have on the continent?

CONCLUSION

The world that existed before the encounter that took place in 1492 was rich and dynamic in cultures, civilizations, and diversity. The first peoples of North America had discovered and settled the continent long before Columbus set sail in 1492. The ancestors of today's American Indians began to people North America during the Ice Age, when land routes existed between Siberia and Alaska. Whether they came by land or water, these original groups of people established agrarian and hunter-gatherer cultures over the centuries, and usually lived in remarkable harmony with their environment. This respect for harmony was a feature of their religions and worldview that, in so many ways, would be different from the European mindset. Later North American Indian cultures established sophisticated trading empires and founded cities that rivaled those of medieval Europe. Their cultural heritage would be lost or changed forever by the impact of European arrival and colonization.

While the first peoples of North America had been establishing their communities, Europeans in the 1400s were on the move, recovering from the wars and the bubonic plague that had decimated the continent in the late 1300s. European contact with North America was motivated in part by the 1452 Muslim conquest of Constantinople, which placed the Eastern Mediterranean under the control of the Ottoman Empire and closed off traditional land and sea routes to India and other centers of trade in Asia. The kingdom of Portugal led the way in exploring sailing routes around Africa. Eventually, new trade relationships gradually developed between Europeans and the many preexisting African empires and kingdoms that had also developed sophisticated cultures and agricultural economies. The Portuguese adopted and exploited the institution of slavery and the slave trade, which had generally disappeared in Europe, and brought African slaves back to Europe even before the first slaves were transported to the Americas.
Over a quarter century before Portugal's Prince Henry the Navigator dispatched his sailors to explore the African coast, the Chinese emperor Zhu Di ordered the construction of the "treasure fleets," which explored and established trade routes in the Indian and Pacific oceans. His ships and sailors matched those of Europe; however, Zhu Di's successor ordered the end of the treasure fleets, which were seen as a drain on China's wealth. For this reason, Europeans had no serious rivals when they first encountered the Americas.

While Portuguese sailors sailed around Africa to reach Asia, an Italian sailor, Christopher Columbus, was commissioned by the king and queen of Spain to try a different route, sailing west across the Atlantic rather than south and east around Africa. The result was an encounter between civilizations in Europe, Africa, and the Americas that knew nothing of each other—a world-changing event for everyone involved.

**CHAPTER REVIEW**

What was life and culture like for Native Americans, Europeans, and Africans before the encounters of 1492?